Trickle Down Services:
Does the Organization Affect Client Services?

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Statement of the Research Problem

Most well-meaning and hard-working human service administrators will tell you that their organizations exist to serve their clients--people with mental illness; those with disabilities or HIV/AIDs; those who suffer from homelessness; the victims of rape. Yet if one were to look at the organizational charts of any number of non-profit organizations, odds are the client would not appear on the chart. This oversight may be because "those who consume the services occupy temporary membership in the organization" (Hasenfeld, 1974, p. 29). However, a less benign view holds that it is "usually the client who is the real bottom of the human services hierarchy" (Toch and Grant, 1982, p. 117).

This study attempted to identify where the client fits into the schema of the organization and how the organization's configuration and processes affect the client's utilization of services as a result of her/his interaction with the social service agency. The researcher investigated the impact of organizational variables and client subculture on client utilization of services (see Figure 1). Three transitional housing programs for homeless families in a northeast, US state were studied over a period of two years.

The study investigated the existence of a "trickle-down" effect, whereby characteristics of a social service organization have a direct or indirect impact on the client experience while receiving services. Specifically, the goal of the study was to explore the effect of increased organizational bureaucracy on client subculture and/or client utilization (defined as participation and satisfaction) of services.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated were: (1) What organizational variables influence client subculture development? (2) Does client subculture development influence client utilization of services? (3) Do organizational variables make an independent contribution to service utilization or only through client subculture development, or both? and (4) Do exogenous variables influence the relationship among the other variables to be studied?

In order to explore the research questions, the following hypotheses were tested:

(A) clients in organizations with less bureaucracy are likely to develop pro-program client subcultures;

(B) the development of pro-program client subcultures is likely to result in higher utilization of services; and

(C) organizations that are less bureaucratic are likely to achieve higher utilization of services.

Bureaucracy was measured via the attributes of size, structure, leadership, rules and sanctions, equity and control of intake and discharge. Client subculture was measured via the attributes of norms/values, view of activities, and pro-/anti-program sentiments. Utilization was measured via the attributes of client satisfaction and client participation. The study also investigated the impact of exogenous variables (access to resources, physical location, sponsorship and client characteristics) on the relationships among variables (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Relationships Among the Study Variables

EXOGENOUS VARIABLES

Availability of Resources
Physical Location
Sponsoring Organization
Client Characteristics

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	INTERVENING VARIABLES	DEPENDENT VARIABLES
<u>Organization:</u>	<u>Client Subculture:</u>	<u>Client Utilization:</u>
Size	Norms/Values	Client Satisfaction
Structure	View of Activities	Client Participation
Leadership	Pro-/Anti-Program Sentiments	
Rules/Sanctions		
Equity		
Control of Intake/Discharge		

Methodology

The methodology employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative methodology included interviews (Tripodi, 1983; Kerlinger, 1986; Patton, 1980), participant observation (Emerson, 1983; Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) and analysis of organizational documents (Patton, 1987). Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with both clients and program directors selected via the available subjects method (Kerlinger, 1986) in order to glean the salient issues that promote or constrain the benefits gained by the client as a result of the program intervention.

The researcher was also a participant observer in client group meetings at all three sites in order to understand the development of client subcultures that support or impede the clients' responses to the program. Also, organizational documents such as program manuals, rules, reports, and schedules were analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the organizational values reflected by the documents and to monitor program changes. Finally, organizational documents such as budgets, structural charts, annual reports and fiscal data were examined in order to assess variables relating to level of bureaucracy.

Observations were systematically documented in narrative form via the accumulation of field notes. Field notes were then coded according to discrete categories. The grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was utilized to determine coding categories according to emerging data, and a content analysis was then performed to classify occurrences documented in field notes. The results of the content analysis were presented in case studies and frequency analyses.

Quantitative Methodology

The quantitative methodology consisted of the administration of surveys (Tripodi, 1983; Kerlinger, 1986) to available clients (Kerlinger, 1986) in order to elicit their views on the variables of client subculture and client utilization. Clients were surveyed in two waves: Wave 1 surveys ($n = 158$) were administered shortly after they arrived at the programs; Wave 2 surveys ($n = 108$) were administered six months later.

The quantitative analysis, where data could be described on an ordinal or interval level, proceeded as follows:

1. perform principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation for survey items which measure similar variables to determine underlying factors. Items which highly correlated to factors were then recoded for into scales as indicated by the analysis;

2. conduct multiple linear regression analysis or analysis of variance (for nonlinear relationships) as appropriate to determine which scales were significantly related to the independent variables; and

3. where items were repeated on Wave 1 and 2 surveys, change scores were tested using lagged endogenous measures in linear regression equations.

A unique contribution of this study is that it employed the method of triangulation (Patton, 1980; Van Maanan, 1983) by using a variety of data sources to gain a better understanding of the relationship among the study variables. Thus, the use of qualitative data sources such as interviews and observations as well as quantitative data sources via survey instruments provided rich information with which to test the study's hypotheses.

Results

Via the qualitative analysis, case studies of the three transitional housing programs were developed. The case studies indicate that the three programs differed greatly in terms of their organizational characteristics and client utilization of services (defined as satisfaction and participation).

Site A: Site A was a medium-sized agency formed by an inter-religious coalition of volunteers. It served 27 families in a suburban locale. The residents were predominantly African-American, with a mean age of 24 and an average high school education. One third of the residents were identified as substance abusers, some racial tensions were experienced in the program, and periods of staff distrust occurred. The goals of Site A included promoting self-sufficiency, assisting clients in pursuing dysfunctional issues and finding/keeping permanent housing. It was an autonomous, single-service agency, with adequate facilities and a location that presented minimal challenges. The staff were professional, with a high staff:client ratio and a low hierarchy. The director's role evolved into a more directive, but less involved orientation. Client participation in services was low, but they were satisfied with the core activities they attended and saw the rules as fairly operated. Site A was classified as a medium-bureaucracy organization.

Site B: Site B was sponsored by its county governmental agency and administered by a large non-profit organization that serves people with disabilities and mental illness. It served 35 families in a rural locale. The residents were predominantly African-American, with a mean age of 24 and average high school education. The goals of Site B were to provide social services and rehabilitation, and assistance for residents transitioning into the community. Its site presented challenges in terms of isolation and upkeep, but the facility was adequate to meet the needs of residents. The staff were professional, the program has a high level of hierarchy, and the Program Coordinator uses a directive style; the case manager:client ratio was 1:8. There was a coercive and restrictive system of rules in place during most of the observation period called the Level System, which was revised toward the end of the observation period to encourage individual responsibility on the part of residents. Residents participated in program activities at a high level, but displayed low satisfaction with the rules; residents held a press conference and hired a lawyer to present a class action suit claiming civil rights abuses due to the restrictive system of rules. Site B was classified as a high bureaucracy organization.

Site C: Site C was sponsored by an independent medium-sized organization. It served 12 families in an urban locale, who were predominantly African-American, with a mean age of 26 and average high school education. Many residents had cognitive and emotional disorders. The goals of Site C were to upgrade the quality of shelter for homeless families, assist them in obtaining permanent housing, and facilitate the transition to successful independent living. The facility was in need of expansion, and its inner-city location provided both the challenges of safety and negative temptations (drugs and alcohol) and easy access to community services. The staff were indigenous members of the local community and non-professionalized, with a low hierarchy and case manager:client ratio (1:6). The Program Director was indigenous, and utilized a participatory style; she was highly involved with the residents. The program imposed a low level of rules. Residents were highly satisfied with the services provided by the program and gained concrete skills and resources which contributed to their self-sufficiency goals. Site C was classified as a low bureaucracy organization.

The case studies and subsequent frequency analyses performed from the content analysis indicated that Site C was the least bureaucratic organization and had the highest client utilization of services. Although many significant relationships were found among the study variables via the quantitative analyses, the most salient results were those that were also supported by the qualitative analysis:

1. clients at Site C, the least bureaucratic organization, saw the program director as having more positive qualities than clients at Site B, the most bureaucratic organization (adjusted $R^2 = .183$, $F = 9.404$, $p < .001$, $df = 2,73$).

2. clients at Site C, the least bureaucratic organization, saw the program staff as more fair with rules than clients at Site B, the most bureaucratic organization (adjusted $R^2 = .045$, $F = 3.299$, $p < .05$, $df = 2,96$).

3. clients at Site C, the least bureaucratic organization, felt they had more freedom

with off-site activities than clients at Site B, the most bureaucratic organization (adjusted R^2 = .160, F = 3.501, $p < .05$, df = 2,88).

4. clients at Site A, the medium bureaucracy organization, saw the core activities they attended as more useful than clients at Site B, the most bureaucratic organization (adjusted R^2 = .075, F = 3.222, $p < .05$, df = 2,53).

5. clients at Site A, the medium bureaucracy organization, saw the rules in general as more fairly operated than clients at Site B, the most bureaucratic organization (adjusted R^2 = .054, F = 4.012, $p < .05$, df = 2,104).

6. clients who said the case worker had positive qualities were more satisfied with their lives after several months in the program than clients who said the case worker had negative qualities (adjusted R^2 = .263, F = 4.319, $p < .01$, df = 7,58).

7. clients at Site C, the least bureaucratic organization, attended activities aimed at preparing for the future more often than clients at both Sites A and B (adjusted R^2 = .164, F = 11.331, $p < .0001$, df = 2,103).

Thus, the study furthered the social work knowledge base by indicating that organizational bureaucracy can have an impact on client utilization of services: clients in organizations with less bureaucracy saw program staff, rules and activities more positively than clients in organizations with more bureaucracy.

Furthermore, the efficacy of a combined qualitative-quantitative methodology was demonstrated in this study. Each methodology illuminated findings and mitigated limitations in the other.

Utility for Social Work Practice

The overall findings of the study indicate that several factors must be taken into account in order to enhance client utilization in human service organizations. The study found that clients in more bureaucratic organizations are concerned about the inequitable application of rules and lack of freedom in the community. Agencies need to understand that they are not in the business of controlling their clients, the rest of the world does enough of that. The number, nature and equitable use of rules should be aimed at protecting the clients and providing standardized care, not at controlling clients for the convenience of staff. Also, freedom to move about the facility and in the community must be provided.

The study also indicated that clients in more bureaucratic organizations are concerned about the qualities of program leaders and clients who saw case workers as having positive qualities were more satisfied with their lives after several months in the program. Program administrators need to be trained in the qualities that make good leaders who are effective and willing to consider input from staff as well as clients. In many cases, social programs serve adults, many of whom have valuable ideas as to the nature of their care. Case workers need to be trained in the qualities that will result in positive, meaningful relationships with clients. Furthermore, clients in organizations with less bureaucracy valued activities which were directly aimed at improving their chances for self-sufficiency in the future. The core activities that organizations offer to clients need to be directly related to their short- and long-term goals.

In summary, if we are interested in enhancing client utilization, the implication for organizational planners is clear: there is a need to develop organizational forms that are less bureaucratic. In this time of consolidation and merger for non-profit agencies, the findings of this study provide an alternative view to the rationale of scales of economy. It is important that planners and leaders look closely at the lost contact with clients and their needs that may derive from the large, bureaucratic form of the social service organization. This study indicated that a trickle-down effect may exist in social service organizations, with characteristics of the organization itself, such as levels of bureaucracy, impacting on the client's experience while receiving services.

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